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ABSTRACT

African American males of all ages constitute a population at risk. Most research to date has emphasized the identification and treatment of problem behaviors within this population, and little research on positive behaviors is available. For example, multiple studies reveal a widespread lack of self-esteem in this population across the lifespan. Recent efforts to improve self-esteem of African American males, including the development of specialized treatment programs and specific ceremonies and rituals, have achieved some success. A holistic wellness model is proposed as an alternate means of helping African American males through an emphasis on their strengths in multiple dimensions as a foundation for assessment and intervention. (Contains 53 references.) (Author)

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Understanding and Enhancing Self-Esteem in African-American Males: Benefits of a Wellness Perspective

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Abstract

African American males of all ages constitute a population at risk. Most research to date has emphasized the identification and treatment of problems behaviors within this population, and little research on positive behaviors is available. For example, multiple studies reveal a widespread lack of self-esteem in this population across the lifespan. Recent efforts to improve self-esteem of African American males, including the development of specialized treatment programs and specific ceremonies and rituals, have achieved some success. A holistic wellness model is proposed as an alternate means of helping African American males through an emphasis on their strengths in multiple dimensions as a foundation for assessment and intervention.

Understanding and Enhancing Self-Esteem in African-American Males: Benefits of a Wellness Perspective

African Americans comprise approximately 13% of the total United States population, and males comprise approximately 46% of this minority group. The percentage of males in the African American population varies from a high of 22% for persons aged 25 to 35 to a low of 6% for persons aged 65 to 75 (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2000). Compared to Caucasians, African Americans have shorter life expectancies and lower levels of education, with 44% being functionally illiterate. They also experience a higher incidence of unemployment and underemployment; the unemployment rate of African American males is double that of Whites (Blake & Darling, 1994). Bell (1987) reported that African American males account for 61% of robbery arrests and 55% of homicide arrests, and one in 21 have the chance of becoming a homicide victim. Although clearly a population at risk (Blake & Darling, 2000; Lee & Bailey, 1997; Mizell, 1999a), African-American males remain among the least understood and least studied of all sex-race groups in the United States (Staples, 1986).

African-American males are often the targets of negative stereotypes and prejudice and are socially devalued (Major & Crocker, 1993). Lacking a sense of hope and optimism for the future, the incidence of social and psychological disengagement and depression is greater among this minority group than among the population in general (Major, Spencer, Schmader, Wolfe, & Crocker, 1998). Howard-Hamilton (1996), James (1998), and others have linked these negative outcomes to lower levels of connectedness to their environments, decreased levels of personal mastery, and a lack of positive self-esteem (Major et. al., 1998; Mizell, 1999b).

Recent efforts to enhance self-esteem, including Afrocentric rites of passage and immersion schools, have had positive outcomes but only limited application to date. In part this

may be due to the emphasis on enhancing the self-esteem of those who are delinquent or educationally impoverished rather than the population of African American males as a whole. On the other hand, the lack of more extensive success may be the result of applying a medical, illness-based model to this population rather than a model that is strength based and conceptualizes African American males from the perspective of wellness.

In this paper, self-esteem is defined and research establishing the importance of self-esteem in the healthy development of African American males across the lifespan is summarized. Treatment programs developed to enhance self-esteem in this population are described, and reasons for the limited success of these programs is discussed. Wellness is presented as a strength-based model for assessment and treatment planning, and suggestions for applying a wellness model to address the developmental and treatment needs of African American males are discussed. Implications for counseling are considered, as well as suggestions for needed research on which to base new and more effective treatment programs to enhance self-esteem among African American males across the lifespan.

Self-Esteem

Mizzell (1999a) defined self-esteem as a global measure of an individual's self-concept that encompasses personal judgments about one's self-worth. High levels of self-esteem characterize people who have an internal locus of control and who are less likely to be influenced by the views of others. Low levels of self-esteem characterize people who have less control of their environment and who have experienced lower levels of satisfaction and happiness. Individuals with high levels of self-esteem typically are excited about new life challenges (Tatum, Calhoun, Brown, & Ayvazian, 2000). Garibaldi (1992) characterized positive self-

esteem as a preventive factor for illness and as an effective tool in enhancing one's ability to recover from a physical illness, thereby enhancing the overall well being of the individual.

Self-esteem has been referred to at various times in the literature as self-concept, sense of worth, and self-worth. Hattie (1992) viewed self-esteem as the process by which individuals consider all aspects of life as important and have the confidence and fortitude to fulfill life's expectations. It reflects our ability to participate in evaluative self-enhancement that confirms or disconfirms our self-appraisals from others (Major et. al., 1998). Self-esteem has been related to other factors that influence human development, such as gender, social class, racial identity, and depression (Blake & Darling, 1994; Garbaldi, 1992; Munford, 1994).

Self-esteem is among the most widely studied concepts in the psychological sciences. In fact, a search of the Psychfirst database with only the key word "self-esteem" resulted in 3,441 articles on this topic in the last 20 years. Although only a small number of these articles have addressed the concerns of African American males, it seems clear that self-esteem is an important component of healthy development and life mastery for this population, and a central mental health component that shapes the development of African American males from adolescence to and throughout adulthood (Franklin & Mizell, 1995).

Self-Esteem of African American Males: A Lifespan Perspective

While other factors also impact the development of African American males, self-esteem plays a unique role in helping African American men construct realities that promote social status, social mobility, and occupational prestige (Franklin & Mizzell, 1995). Self-esteem in African-American males has been studied in a variety of ways and with subpopulations of men across most of the lifespan (Major et. al., 1998). In this section, representative studies and findings with pre-school aged children, middle-school students, high school students, college

students, and adults reveal the pervasive influence of self-esteem on development and functioning in these minority males.

Justice, Lindsey, and Morrow (1999) studied the relationship between self-concept, self-esteem, racial preference and academic achievement in African American preschool children, and concluded that self-esteem is a significant predictor of academic achievement for African Americans beginning in preschool. The authors noted that African American children develop a sense of academic competence as early as preschool and that this sense influences their subsequent behavior and achievement in academic settings. Similarly, Spencer (1993) concluded that interventions designed to increase the self-esteem of African American males should start early and continue in developmentally specific and appropriate ways.

Seyfried (1998) studied factors that influenced the academic success of 113 middle-class African American fourth, fifth, and sixth-grade students, including their parents and classroom teachers. He found that African American males often adopt an aloof, defiant attitude as a way of coping with perceived discrimination in the classroom. Teachers misinterpreted the motivation behind this behavior, viewed them as troublemakers, and spent less time with them in their academic pursuits. This resulted in lower grade point averages and lower self-esteem.

The high school transition can be difficult for African American males, who are simultaneously coping with the challenges of adolescence, the need to establish a firm sense of identity (Erikson, 1963), and with the development of racial identity (Cross, 1978, 1991). Witherspoon and Speight (1997) studied the extent to which racial identity, self-esteem, and academic self-concept were related to academic achievement for 86 African American high school students participating in Upward Bound programs at two medium-size universities in the Midwest. They found a linear relationship between self-esteem and academic self-concept: as

self-esteem increased or decreased, academic self-concept increased or decreased. They concluded that self-esteem had a greater impact on the academic self-concept of African American high school students than did family support and peer support.

- Increased participation by African American males in higher education has led to new efforts to evaluate the effect self-esteem has on their academic achievement (Cokley, 2000). For example, Taylor and Howard-Hamilton (1995) detailed the importance of self-esteem in both African American male college students and African American professionals. They concluded that young African American males who developed a sense of belonging and felt connected to the campus environment were more likely to have a positive sense of self-esteem and racial identity than those who did not feel connected to campus life.

James (1998) detailed the impact of social alienation on the self-esteem of African American males on predominantly white college campuses. Students who displayed high levels of self-esteem and a positive self-image were more likely to have lower levels of social alienation. They were also more likely to return to college for another semester. James' findings underscore the relationship between positive self-esteem and a sense of belonging, both critical for African American males' success in higher education.

In a related study, Bradley (2001) found that African American males must learn to work through issues of self-esteem, racism, and unique educational challenges in order to transition effectively through college into adulthood. Franklin and Mizell (1995) examined the factors that influence success among African American adult men using an unstructured interview technique that incorporated inquiries about childhood, early family structure, early development, self-concept, self-esteem, and other important components of lifestyle development. Their research showed that self-esteem was an important factor that helped to facilitate success.

Although we were unable to find studies of self-esteem among older adult African American males, it seems evident from the research described here that self-esteem is an important and necessary factor that mitigates for positive development and functioning across the lifespan of the African American male (White-Hood, 1994). High levels of self-esteem are considered critical for successful African American males to combat the racial discrimination and prejudice they experience as they work towards their intended life goals (Blake & Darling, 2000). As a consequence, Lee and Bailey (1997) underscored the need for future research that illuminates the issues and factors that affect self-esteem in a positive manner. To date, most research has been correlational in nature, and thus reveals relationships rather than causal factors.

Correlates of Self-Esteem in African American Males

Correlational studies examine relationships among demographic, psychological, and social factors, with the goal of revealing associations that can be used to predict or influence self-esteem. Multiple studies of self-esteem among African American males have identified factors that seem to affect, directly, the development of positive esteem. These factors include personal sense of mastery, sense of belonging, family support, and religion.

Mizell (1999b) defined personal mastery as one's ability to feel a sense of control over and organization in his or her environment. In contrast to self-esteem, which is a global measure of an individual's overall feelings of competence, personal mastery deals with the individual's ability to meet life's challenges and obstacles. Personal mastery has been linked to positive outcomes such as life satisfaction, educational attainment, occupational status, and positive mental health (Mizell). Individuals who cope well with hardships and life disruptions are considered to have high levels of personal mastery and are considered to have attitudes that foster psychological well-being (James, 1998). Cokley (2000) correlated high levels of personal

mastery with positive ethnic identity and self-esteem among the African American male population. Personal mastery also has been positively correlated with increased religious activity, parental/family support, and a sense of belonging (Witherspoon & Speight, 1997).

Sense of belonging, or mattering, refers to perceptions that one is important to others (Schlossberg, Lynch & Chickering, 1989). An individual's ability to feel part of his or her environment is a central component of a sense of belonging (Ancis, Bezner, Drabbs, Zambarano, & Steinhardt, 2000). Major et al. (1998) correlated increased levels of belonging among African American males with lower levels of psychological disengagement from their environments. Blake and Darling (1994) identified sense of belonging as important to both academic success and academic self-concept for African American males. When African American males feel connected to their environment, they are more likely to have higher levels of racial identity and higher levels of self-esteem (Munford, 1994). Thus, high levels of self-esteem allow African American males to develop a strong sense of belonging (Ancis et al., 2000).

An African American male's sense of belonging is affected by the proximity of his family and the level of support the family provides (Mizell, 1999b). When they live in supportive family environments, they are more likely to display high levels of self-esteem and to maintain high levels of academic self-concept (Harvey & Coleman, 1997). Family kinship provides many basic needs, including financial support, childcare, and appropriate role models for fatherless children (Huff-Corzine, Corzine, & Moore, 1991). Though many African American families experience social isolation and economic disadvantage, the kinship network provides its members the opportunity to maintain a high level of self-esteem (Haveman & Wolfe, 1994)

Ellison (1993) identified religion as an integral part of the African American community. The kinship network manifests itself in the rituals and expressiveness of the African American

church, and many African American males have found social support and status through participation in religious services (Ellison). The social network and support found within the African American church improves self-confidence and provides examples of successful role models for young African American males (Harris, 1994). This translates to higher levels of educational and occupational attainment and higher levels of self-esteem (Graham, 1994). Unfortunately, the widespread lack of religious participation for adolescent African American males has a negative effect on their sense of personal mastery and can extend into their adult lives (Franklin & Mizzell, 1995). Programs to enhance self-esteem of young African American males may have only limited success when based in religious institutions due to this lack of participation.

Programs to Enhance Self-Esteem of African American Males

The lifespan impact of self-esteem on African American males has been well documented, as have correlates of positive self-esteem. These correlates provide a foundation for the development of programs to enhance self-esteem, especially in young African American males. These programs include Afrocentric rites of passage programs and education or school-based programs designed specifically for African American males. Harvey and Coleman (1997) concluded that these approaches have had positive effects on some delinquent and educationally impoverished African American males who have not received the services they needed from traditional educational and social programs.

Afrocentric Rites of Passage

Rites of passage refer to ritualized events that signify change, particularly coming of age. Hill (1999) explained how the loss of rich African traditions that comprise these rituals, which emphasize personal mastery and locus of control, has left a void in the development of African

youth, and further suggested that the institution of new rites may help promote positive development and self-esteem. Although a variety of such programs exist, one focused on males in the juvenile justice system provides an example of the benefits of helping youth experience Afrocentric rites of passage (Harvey & Coleman, 1997). The program was developed by the MAAT Center for Human and Organizational Enhancement, Inc. and teaches African American adolescent males and their families, in the home setting, from an Afrocentric orientation. "MAAT" is an Egyptian word referring to living a virtuous and moral life (Karenga, 1987). The focus is on group identity, spirituality, and collectivity, using strategies that help to build character, self-esteem, and unity as a family, community, and race of people (Harvey & Coleman, 1997).

Based on the African principle of naturalism, the family is given the opportunity to define who constitutes the family. Sessions scheduled weekly are designed to enhance effective parental discipline, positive self-concept and self-esteem, happiness, family cooperation, and emotional strength. Individual sessions are scheduled for the African American male adolescent in the home and focus on developing his strengths, capabilities, attitudes, and self-esteem (Harvey & Coleman, 1997). Interventions emphasize the interplay of community support for the individual and the individual's support of the community. Counseling continues until the adolescent demonstrates attitudinal and behavioral lifestyle changes. The rites of passage program also includes an after-school adolescent group in which African American males work together to make lifestyle changes by fostering new relationships and building positive self-esteem through the personal and cultural strengths of the group.

Education or School-Based Programs

While the rites of passage program focuses on African American males in the juvenile justice system, other programs have been designed to address the needs of African American males in educational settings. Sanders and Reed (1995) highlighted the establishment of African American male immersion schools designed to address specific problems of educationally at-risk students. These schools differ from traditional schools in that they provide a curriculum designed to address the unique needs of African American males and to increase self-pride and self-esteem.

Immersion schools have seven distinct characteristics: (a) a male mentoring program, (b) the incorporation of "Rites of Passage" activities, (c) the provision of tutorial assistance, (d) the implementation of an Afrocentric curriculum in addition to the prescribed curriculum, (e) the incorporation of a "families" concept, (f) a strong emphasis on student management and family intervention, and (g) special requirements for teachers assigned to the school (Sanders & Reed, 1995). Immersion schools have implemented different activities to develop intellectual achievement, self-awareness, self-respect, and self-esteem among African American males

The need to cultivate young African American scholars is not limited to entire schools but has also been addressed through specific school programs (Midgette, Franklin, Walker, & Andrews, 1998). Partners in Reading Opportunities: Mentors Inviting Successful Education (Project P.R.O.M.I.S.E.) is an elementary school reading and mentoring program in an urban, southeastern community in the United States designed to address the problem of academic achievement, search for identity, and role identification for African American boys. Intervention strategies are designed to address the basic competency skills that typical successful students have developed: academic and survival skills, positive self-concept and self-esteem,

communication and interpersonal skills, coping ability, and control over decisions, behavior and their future. These strategies include intensive staff development, peer mediation, after-school tutorials, parent-community relationships, and field trips to a historically Black university campus.

Limitations of Existing Programs

Both rites of passage and school-based programs have had positive effects on some delinquent and educationally-impoverished African American males who have not received the services they needed from traditional educational and social programs (Harvey & Coleman, 1997), however, many more remain in need of help. One weakness of existing programs is that they view the problems of African American youth from an illness perspective (i.e., what is "wrong" and how can it be fixed?) and as a consequence tend to be reactive as opposed to proactive. From a counseling perspective, another weakness is the basis of these programs in education and juvenile justice, settings in which counselors play a subordinate role.

In contrast, using emerging strengths-based approaches such as that defined by wellness, individuals are not pathologized but rather evaluated in relation to the skills required to maintain themselves in their environment. Such approaches are easily implemented in traditional settings in which African American males are found, including public schools and colleges as well as business and industry. Importantly, they emphasize the development of personal responsibility as a means of enhancing self-esteem (Herr & Niles, 2001). The emphasis in wellness includes prevention, development over the lifespan, and optimization of behavior, thus providing a philosophy consistent with that of counselors (Cross, Nicholas, Gobble, & Frank, 1992; Myers, Sweeney, & Witmer, 2001).

Wellness: A Strength Based Paradigm for Prevention and Intervention

Wellness has been defined as "the process and state of a quest for maximum human functioning that involves the body, mind, and spirit" (Archer, Probert, & Gage, 1987, p. 311). From a wellness perspective, a balanced lifestyle is important and is both a process and a goal (Hettler, 1984). Wellness is a multifaceted concept that includes a variety of behavioral domains, including self-esteem. The domains that comprise the concept of wellness have been described through a variety of models of wellness, most of which are based in the physical health sciences and emphasize physical aspects of functioning. The Wheel of Wellness model (Myers, Sweeney, & Witmer, 2000; Witmer & Sweeney, 1992) is unique in that it is based in counseling theory, yet still includes the aspects of body, mind, and spirit.

In the Wheel of Wellness model, five life tasks are defined as necessary for individuals to achieve optimal health: spirituality, self-direction, work and leisure, friendship, and love. The life task of self-direction includes 12 additional subtasks: These subtasks are: (a) sense of worth, (b) sense of control, (c) realistic beliefs, (d) emotional awareness and coping, (e) problem solving and creativity, (f) sense of humor, (g) nutrition, (h) exercise, (i) self-care, (j) stress management, (k) gender identity, and (l) cultural identity. The life tasks interact dynamically with different forces of life, including religion, community, education, government, and media.

When applied by counselors, the Wheel model provides a foundation for assessment as well as intervention. Myers et al. (2000) suggest a four-phase approach when working with clients. The first step is to explain the model and the second is to have clients assess, either formally or informally, their wellness in each dimension included in the model. Next, one or two areas are chosen for intervention and a plan is developed to foster increased wellness in that area. The plan should include a focus on strengths identified as higher levels of wellness in other areas

of the Wheel. Finally, evaluation of outcomes is suggested in order to facilitate further assessment and successful interventions.

Myers et al. (2000) emphasized the interactive nature of the 17 components in the Wheel model. Although each component is discrete and supported as a component of wellness through cross-disciplinary research across the lifespan, the components overlap and interact; thus change in any one area contributes to or causes change in other areas. Because self-esteem, or sense of worth, is included in the model, interventions that focus either on this component or on any of the other 16 theoretically should result in an increase in self-esteem. Thus, this model can provide an effective approach to addressing the developmental and treatment needs of African American males.

Wellness and African American Males: Making the Connection

The connection between wellness and self-esteem is an important link for counselors who work with African American males in settings that traditionally have been problematic and difficult (Cokley, 2000). Using the wellness paradigm to view problems from a strength-based approach, counselors may gain a deeper and clearer understanding of the reasons for the lack of commitment for African American males in the educational setting and in the counseling process. This increase in awareness can foster a better relationship between African American males and counselors. Conceptualization of African American males from a wellness perspective can be used to empower them and can be a valuable resource in the implementation of strategies designed to deal more effectively with social alienation, depression, discrimination, and racism (Evans, 1999; Lee, 1997).

Bradley (2001) advocated the use of proactive, developmental interventions to meet the unique needs of ethnic minority students. She encouraged counselors to increase their awareness

of the unique societal and educational challenges African American males face and to develop programs designed to address issues of racism, self-esteem, and coping. One strength of the wellness paradigm is that it promotes a focus on the specific needs of each individual and does not erroneously assume that all African American males have the same needs.

Reglin (1994) concluded that a blueprint for action to promote academic and personal success for African American males should include programs designed to build self-esteem and to address the importance of cultural factors in their lives. He believed that educators respond to African American males in ways that are both controlling and that lower their expectations for academic success. Further, he encouraged counselors to help educators and school systems change this paradigm by advocating for a restructuring of the school curriculum to meet the developmental challenges faced by African American students. The wellness paradigm offers a logical and effective basis for restructuring both curricular and co-curricular experiences. Within the community, the wellness paradigm can provide a foundation for designing programs that are community-based, developmental, and that address the unique self-esteem needs of African American males in community settings (Zimmerman, Ramirez-Valles, and Maton, 1999).

Further research is needed to develop a better understanding of self-esteem and its connection to wellness in the African American male population. Outcome research on the connection between wellness and self-esteem can provide insights into the holistic effects of self-esteem on other aspects of functioning in this population. Research on differences in self-esteem and wellness within the African American male population and between these individuals and other populations can inform counseling practice and promote the development of effective interventions. Most importantly, the development of a knowledge base of positive behaviors can do much to help eliminate negative, stereotypical views of this minority within a minority

population. This information can be crucial in helping to increase the self-esteem and wellness of African-American males in a society that often marginalizes their existence (Blake & Darling, 1994).

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